Changing for GOOD

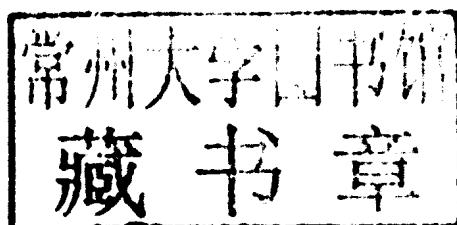## SUSTAINING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Acknowledgments

Numerous people contributed in significant ways to the production and publication of this book and the study that underpins it. I wholeheartedly thank my colleague, Wayne Usui, who urged me to pursue the study, competently oversaw the quantitative analyses, and assisted me in qualitative data collection. We spent countless hours in a conference room recollecting stories from the field, discussing our insights, and pondering outcomes. I thank him for his enthusiastic support and mentoring not only during the years of this project but also over my entire career. I am grateful to other friends, scholars, and colleagues including Brian Powell, Steve Clements, Betty Lou Whitford, and Cynthia Negrey who encouraged me through this project by giving me sound guidance, providing useful comments, and asking thought-provoking questions. I deeply appreciate the work of the graduate assistants who helped manage literature reviews, data collection, storage, and tracking, especially Katalina, Jill, Linda, Karen, and Josh. Thanks to Autumn for prompt, accurate transcription and sharp insight regarding interview data and to Jonetta and Lisa, who helped me navigate the complexities of the federal grants process. Finally, I thank anonymous reviewers and Corwin Senior Acquisitions Editor Debra Stollenwerk for her support, assistance, and patience in helping this project reach completion.

From the beginning of the study, I looked forward to traveling the state, visiting schools. I approached it like a series of adventurous road trips, and I was rewarded on many levels. First, I became better able to grasp the enormity of undertaking school reform at the local, state, and national levels. Second, I met a professional goal of providing state policymakers, district and school officials, and others with insights developed over the life of the project. As a researcher and scholar, I was deeply satisfied when one school administrator said he viewed my efforts as "part of the solution rather than part of the problem." Third, the experience was personally rewarding in that I made many friends along the way, like a bus driver who took me up the district's back roads on his route, a principal who called me long distance to alert me to expect bad weather when driving to her school, another principal who invited me to hike a nearby mountain

trail with her, and an entire eighth-grade class that I had the honor of hosting at our university's planetarium when they traveled to my city on their class field trip. These new friends and dozens like them gave hours of their time to help me "get it right" in understanding how their schools approached the awesome task of sustaining improvement.

About the Author

Melissa Evans-Andris is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. Her interests include the sociology of education, work and occupations, and qualitative research methodologies, particularly as they relate to schools and teaching. Her research focuses on school reform, sustainability of school improvement, and teacher quality. She authored a book titled *An Apple for the Teacher: Computers and Work in Elementary Schools.* Most recently, she directed two research efforts, including Comprehensive School Reform, Educational Dynamics, and Achievement in Kentucky Middle Schools, and A Research Study of the Kentucky Teacher Internship Program Pilot Project, which tracked the experiences of new teacher-interns during their first three years on the job. She is active in local and statewide discussion forums related to school improvement and reform.

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Introduction

In the fall of the third and final year of their funding cycle through the federal Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program, I arrived in the front office of a large middle school to observe educators and learn about their experiences with their reform model. The secretary alternated between answering the phone, chatting with a guard, and shouting instructions to someone over a walkie-talkie. While she talked on one phone, the school's reform facilitator picked up another line and placed an order for flowers to be delivered to a funeral home. Then she looked over at me and said, "We got our test scores last week. We went down again." About that time, the principal—the third in three years—rushed by. She apologized that she couldn't talk as she was heading to a meeting at central office about implementing a new program in the school. She said she would tell me more about it later, and with that, she was out the door.

That week, I saw little evidence of classroom teachers employing instructional strategies promoted by the school's reform program. Rather, I observed classes across all content areas where much instructional time was devoted to homework review, worksheets, copying information from a chalkboard, independent reading, and off-task conversation. The little time spent in direct instruction was interrupted frequently by messages over the intercom system, disciplinary actions, or other unrelated activities.

Late in the week, I attended an afterschool faculty-training session held by a representative of the school's reform program. Originally, the meeting was to be on Halloween but teachers complained, and thus, it had been rescheduled. Even so, only the principal and 6 teachers from a faculty of 27 attended. The presenter delayed starting the session for about 10 minutes in hopes that additional teachers would arrive. When no one else came, she distributed multiple handouts for the audience to read and discuss. The teachers snacked, read a little, and chatted among themselves. The principal left after she ate. Rather than focusing on the session's topic of persuasive writing strategies, much of the discussion digressed to a host of topics including recipes, Halloween costumes, regulations and scoring

of writing portfolios required in the state's annual assessment, and other minimally or unrelated matters.

As the meeting drew on, I began to reflect back on the week. I had learned that assessment scores had declined, and with the blessing of the district, the principal already was entertaining the idea of another reform. I observed few signs of changed behavior or interest in the present reform program among teachers. The program's afterschool training session was poorly attended. Few faculty members came, the principal left early, and the school's program facilitator did not come at all. Teachers who attended showed little interest; rather, they were distracted by more pressing interests such as assessment standards. The presenter tolerated off-task conversation throughout most of the session. When considering the life course of the reform model in this school over the last several years, it seemed that nearly everyone I had encountered that week already had dismissed it as "another reform effort" that didn't stick.

Throughout my career, I have been fascinated with innovation and reform efforts in schools. Presenting a new policy, tool, or strategy into an educational setting and then watching how people respond to it, how it becomes defined by users over time, and how it affects users and schools is captivating to me. In this book, I focus on why and how practitioners embrace and sustain change rather than disregarding it and allowing it to fade away, as the school in this example.

Understanding school reform and its sustainability has held my attention for nearly two decades beginning with an examination of computer implementation in the mid-1980s when schools acquired desktop computers in record numbers. A new statewide policy enabled schools despite size, socioeconomic status, and urban or rural location to obtain reserves of computers. I followed the introduction and implementation of the technology over the next 10 years while dozens of educators shared with me their goals, frustrations, and visions for this innovation and its application in the classroom.

As I learned more about how teachers defined and used computers and the extent to which teaching was affected by the technology, I honed a sharp understanding regarding the implementation and the effects of this technological change in schools. I determined that despite the massive acquisition of computer technology in schools across the state, principals and teachers did not perceive it as useful to their jobs (Evans-Andris, 1996). Consequently, the extent to which it became integrated and sustained as an instructional tool was minimal. Moreover, its application in classrooms nationwide has not changed dramatically since that time (Cuban, 2001).

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

In the 1990s, a new type of school reform at the national level caught the attention of educators, sociologists of education, and others. Funded by

the federal CSR program, thousands of schools implemented schoolwide reform models over the last decade. Targeting Title I or high-poverty schools, particularly those identified as low performing, and serving all students rather than subgroups, an underlying notion is that schools will be more effective when they adopt a unified, coherent, whole-school approach to increase student and school performance, rather than adding fragmented programs or investing in personnel dedicated to small groups of students in pullout programs (Berends, 2000). Policymakers and reform model developers commonly assumed that users would embrace and integrate reform components into their daily work routines. Yet despite the potential for lasting improvement, outcomes involving whole-school reform in many schools have not have been widespread or sustained. In schools like the one described earlier, implementation appeared to be disrupted by any number of factors such as the succession of principals, the pressure of assessment, ineffective professional development linked to the reform program, disinterest or disenchantment of faculty, and the lure of newer reforms.

Indeed, as I learned more about CSR, its potential for spawning improvement intrigued me. The program infused struggling schools with additional funds, most of which went toward purchasing a research-based model for whole-school reform. I, like many others, wondered if improvement would take hold and, if so, how long it would last.

Even though the nature of the reform is fundamentally different, I applied what I had learned about the implementation and sustainability of instructional innovation with computer technology to begin asking new questions about the conditions necessary to effectively introduce, implement, and sustain school reform models in low-performing schools. What goals guided reform, and how was it supported at each level in the overarching structure of the education system? Who were the *champions of change*, and what strategies did they employ to promote, manage, and sustain reform efforts? What was the nature of teacher commitment during reform? What was the relationship between reform program implementation and patterns of school performance and student achievement over time? Finally, to what extent did schools prepare for and sustain improvement strategies after their federal funding for reform expired?

PURPOSE AND FOCUS OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to deepen understanding and identify strategies to inform practice regarding the implementation, effects, and sustainability of reform that schools nationwide grapple with. Many of the questions I posed have gone unanswered or unexplained in the literature on school reform generally and the literature on whole-school reform

specifically. To answer them, this book examines how one major federal educational improvement policy played out at the school level as educators shaped and sustained reform efforts. Using the CSR program as a case in point, the book explicitly describes and analyzes variations in experiences and outcomes linked to the following:

- Conditions leading schools to seek reform
- Characteristics of district contexts in which reform is implemented
- Patterns of leadership in reforming schools
- Ways that reform implementation affects teachers' work
- Factors contributing to schools' propensity to sustain improvement strategies

The examination of these issues as they relate to school reform provides insight about their effects on the school environment as well as on participants. Further, it lays the foundation of a conceptual model for sustaining reform that identifies what shapes the change process and contributes to sustained improvement.

This book addresses concerns and questions held by a wide range of educational stakeholders, such as state and district administrators and school practitioners who are engaged directly in reform efforts or contemplating reform, particularly with externally developed, whole-school models. Practically, it determines and makes recommendations about what districts and schools, along with state departments of education and reform developers, can do to enhance the potential of reform and its sustainability on the organizational climate of schools, the work of teachers, and the experiences of students. The book also addresses the interests of educational policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels who shape and fund policy directed at broad scale school reform.

The book features cases from the research that exemplify successful, strategic practice for educators seeking to improve and sustain change efforts in their schools and districts. These are summarized in the Recommendations for Educators section found in Chapter 8. From this, educators may develop more effective policies and practices involving reform implementation and management to optimize its lasting positive effects on schools, teachers' work, and the learning experiences of students.

At a more theoretical level, the book speaks to the concerns of scholars, researchers, and instructors of education, especially those interested in organizations, accountability, and reform, by examining the implementation and sustainability of change in schools to develop a more holistic model of reform sustainability at the K–12 level. It also offers a detailed methodology and discusses ethical and practical issues involving field research.

RESEARCHING REFORM SUSTAINABILITY IN SCHOOLS

Unlike most studies about school reform, this book provides an intimate detailed view of the microdynamics of reforming schools and reveals outcomes grounded in their day-to-day experiences. Quantitative research on reform readily identifies patterns and causal linkages or effects, but typically, it is not able to provide rich explanations about patterns of change or capture the decision-making processes that led to them. Few studies of CSR are qualitatively based or longitudinal, yet such a research methodology best addresses the questions and purpose guiding this book.

Thus, data collection for this study involved ethnographic data from extensive field observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis in 18 CSR-funded schools over three years and quantitative analysis of a larger sample of 74 schools over six years. The study specifically considered factors including school organization and climate, leadership and support for change, and commitment and professional development in relations to the schools' propensity to implement reform strategies, realize gains, and sustain change. The schools were located in Kentucky, served a seventh-grade population and were identified in 1998 as low performing based on their index scores from the state testing system. The Kentucky experience provides an interesting case because, like many other states, it had exerted increasing standardization and pressures related to assessment and accountability but also provided various support systems that in some respects, may have poised schools for further assistance toward improvement with comprehensive school reform models.

The ethnographic portion of the study provides the basis for this book. Beginning in the 2001–2002 school year, the last year of the CSR three-year funding cycle, and again as a follow-up two years later, in the 2003–2004 school year, a full five years after schools had begun reform with CSR, my colleague, Wayne Usui, and I collected data in each of the 18 CSR-funded schools. We observed in classrooms and other areas around the school that promised to provide information pertaining to its reform experiences. We devoted extensive amounts of time in these settings and focused on patterns of model implementation in the school and classrooms, climate, leadership, attitudes of teachers and others toward reform, instructional practices and indications of model adoption and effects, and efforts toward sustainability.

We conducted in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, in-school program facilitators, district administrators, and other key informants, and then reinterviewed most of those respondents two years later, totaling more than 250 interviews. Respondents shared their accounts of how the school selected and gained a comprehensive reform model, how they viewed their role and the role of others in the process of change, how they went about

implementing specific model components into their schools and work routines, and finally, how they arrived at decisions about whether the school would sustain reform efforts. They also discussed the lasting effects of the reform model on their work and teaching strategies. Analysis of the second wave of qualitative data enabled us not only to detect changes but also to capture the attitudes, sentiments, and reflections of educators about their experience. Importantly, it also provided the opportunity to make determinations about how schools decided whether to sustain improvement efforts involving a school reform program and with what outcomes. The study's multimethod design allowed us to collect and balance accounts from different stakeholders and decision makers and to compare patterns identified in the third year against those from the first. The Resource section provides a more in-depth account of the field methods. Though the findings are not generalizable, they may substantively and theoretically inform schools and districts elsewhere as they undertake improvement efforts related to promoting and sustaining reform.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In contrast to schools like the one described earlier that demonstrated poor practices and seemed unlikely to sustain improvement efforts, it is more instructional and informative to examine schools that are changing for good—that is, schools that are sustaining reform efforts. The book highlights organizational conditions that led those schools to sustain their programs in their entirety or some aspects of the reform experience rather than dismiss them after the expiration of CSR funding. It traces their experiences as they selected, implemented, and continued reform efforts after the funded three-year period. Though patterns may vary, the book reveals that schools are more likely to consider reform efforts as a lasting part of the educational landscape when they have or develop (1) a state context that promotes reform; (2) district support for reform; (3) strong leadership distributed across administration and faculty; (4) commitment among teachers to their profession, to their school, and to improvement; and (5) a belief among users that their reform efforts are having a positive effect in the school. Taken together, these themes provide a sound basis for a model of introducing and sustaining school improvement, which will be presented in Chapter 1.

The book is organized around these themes. The first two chapters lay the contextual groundwork for examining school reform. Specifically, Chapter 1 discusses the challenges of implementing and sustaining school reform. It provides an overview of school reform policies at the national level over two decades, including CSR and No Child Left Behind, which attempted to move school improvement in coherent, integrated ways. It identifies goals, successes, and failures of these policies and raises questions